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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECLARATION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

Written statement submitted by the Bahá'í International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[18 December 1990]

Report on religious intolerance

1. The Report (E/CN.4/1990/46) submitted by Mr. Angelo Vidal Ribeiro to the forty-sixth session of the Commission on Human Rights provides renewed reason for satisfaction with the decision of the Commission to renew his mandate as Special Rapporteur to undertake a study of circumstances inconsistent with the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Together with the submissions by Mr. Theo van Boven and Mrs. Elizabeth Odio-Benito to the forty-second session of the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, the Report provides a sound foundation for further action by the Commission.

2. As Mr. Ribeiro's reports have pointed out, religious intolerance is a complex phenomenon with a multitude of causes. Available evidence suggests the underlying one is a pervasive ignorance about the beliefs of other peoples, an ignorance which breeds suspicion and fear. Frequently, the effects of this lack of understanding have been exacerbated by historical events which have left legacies of cultural estrangement.

3. Whatever the etiology, the correction of such attitudes depends on society's willingness to undertake and maintain long-term programmes of re-education at several levels. Particularly important is the preventative effect that the proper education of children achieves when carried out systematically in elementary and secondary school curricula. Equally important, in another way, is the appropriate use of the public information media to achieve what the Special Rapporteur has called "a broader dissemination of the principles contained in the Declaration, so as to prevent the spreading of stereotypes which might lead to lack of comprehension and tolerance" (E/CN.4/1989/44). As Mr. Ribeiro adds, UNESCO can play a particularly important role in this respect. The Bahá'í International Community further shares the Special Rapporteur's view that interfaith dialogues at both the national and international levels can contribute significantly to such a thrust toward broad public re-education.

4. There is general recognition, however, that religion itself has historically played a major role in creating conditions in which religious intolerance can take root. History is replete with examples of antagonistic attitudes which have arisen not through ignorance, circumstance, or even policy, but rather because of people's sincere attachment to beliefs about the deepest questions of life, which have differed irreconcilably from those of their neighbours. This perennial feature of humanity's religious life is very much an influence in the present human rights landscape. Further, many members of the Commission and observer organizations will undoubtedly share, as the Bahá'í International Community does, Mr. Ribeiro's view that "the intransigence of extremist elements and their demand for a literal interpretation ... is at the root of many manifestations of religious conflict in the world" (E/CN.4/1989/44).

5. While the relevant theological questions are clearly beyond the Commission's mandate, their impact on human rights falls well within its scope. Here again, the Bahá'í International Community believes that the principal available remedy lies in the field of re-education, not only in its effective use, but in the perspective in which programmes are undertaken.

6. It is a truism to point out that we are living at a period of history in which the earth has become a common homeland for a rapidly integrating human race. Whatever differences of belief may continue to divide us, the unyielding realities of contemporary history require that we learn to live together. This view must, the Bahá'í International Community believes, form the framework of any efforts of the re-education that seek to influence attitude and behaviour in the field of religious tolerance.

7. Finally, the Bahá'í International Community wishes to endorse in the strongest terms the view of the Special Rapporteur that "... the persistence of the problem of intolerance and discrimination in this field calls for the preparation of an international instrument dealing specifically with the elimination of this phenomenon" (E/CN.4/1989/44). Entailing, as the Special Rapporteur points out, provisions for the submission of reports and more substantial petitioning mechanisms, such a legal measure would greatly enhance the success of educational measures adopted.